Killing the South to save the North: or the Racism of Climate Change

Climate change (CC) is a natural process; it's been happening ever since the earth formed. It allowed life to form 3.6 billion years ago. It has led to the collapse of massive civilisations, like the Indus valley Civilisation. Humans have always had to deal with climate change. In our current era, humans must deal with it again, but this time we are its cause.

Anthropogenic CC is the result the many different changes to humanity in the last 200 years but most of them stem from an intrinsically racist capitalist system. Racism is a form of prejudice which affects lower ranked racial groups at the benefit of those ranked above (Imani, 2021). At its very core, the only way to succeed under our current economic model is to exploit someone in the process of production. These people tend to have darker skins. The prioritisation of profit over people, efficiency over environment has led to large amounts of carbon and pollutants in the atmosphere. This has led to environmental decline and *global* CC. This is a major contemporary problem, but right now, the solutions in place seem to kill the darker skinned south, to save the lighter skinned north.

Anthropogenic causes of climate change

The theory of anthropogenic climate change suggests that the current trend of global warming is caused by the anthropogenic emissions of greenhouse gasses. The increase in anthropogenic emissions of CO2 can be traced back to the industrialisation of the global north in the late 1800s. The main reason for their increase at this time was the mechanisation of production and burning of coal for energy. Other contributions to the increasing anthropogenic emissions may include changes in modes of transport, increasing populations and increased production of food to support these.

For instance, oil is one of the most used fuels. In 2023, the largest producer and user of oil was the USA. Of the top 10 oil companies, three are American, the largest being ExxonMobile which operates in 50 countries (Rudge, 2025). The largest oil producing company is Saudi Aramco, a state-owned oil giant. This highlights the complexity of the issue, as figures show that Saudi Arabia has the highest oil consumption per capita, at nearly 2x that of the USA (Powell, 2024). Hence, contemporary emissions are coming from the south, and it's their job to reduce these. However, much of the south is currently trying to improve access to energy across their states. This can help alleviate poverty and improve the quality of life for billions. Poverty in most of these countries can be traced back to colonialism.

There is a divide between those who cause CC and those who are affected by it. 92% of global excess emissions have come from the global north (Hickel,2020). Even considering the contemporary emission giants, China and India, most emissions have come from the whiter north (Williams, 2022). However, effects are felt more in the south.

Effects of climate change on societies

In the North, black and brown communities are more likely to suffer from its effects. 2005's Hurricane Katrina hit black neighbourhoods disproportionately. The same thing happened with 2017's Hurricane Harvey in Houston (Williams, 2022). People of colour are also more likely to be exposed to pollution and waste, both contributing to environmental decline, CC and worsening health (YCC TEAM, 2025). These negative effects are often compound by reduced access to healthcare, education and political power; the result of institutional racism (Williams, 2022).

Effects are also felt disproportionately globally. Equatorial societies will bear the brunt of these (Greenpeace UK, 2022). With desertification and droughts taking place in the Sahel, causing mass migration and deaths. These are both examples of lands who were left heavily poor after colonial influence and are now suffering from the effects of CC, brought about by the exploitation of their lands for white people. In the Indian subcontinent alone, more than 10 million people are displaced annually due to natural disasters. Bangladesh is the 7th most at risk country from 2000-2019 (Global Climate Risks Platform,2019). Yet emissions sit at about 1.23 tonnes per person, considerably lower than most northerners.

Human response to climate change

It is here the racism surrounding CC is most apparent. Firstly, the discourse around it is very much spoken through a white mouthpiece. When there is discussion about CC, those worst affected are often left out. It was found that African voices were often left out of climate debates (Williams, 2022). COP26 saw that a lack of funding and available space left African voices underrepresented. This meant that the debates lacked the nuanced perspective of those who will be worst affected.

Even when it comes to media coverage of activists, those with white skin usually get shone with a brighter light. The Swedish Gretta Thunberg gained international recognition for her climate action while people like Disha Ravi (Indian) and Sumak Helena Gualinga (Kichwa Sarayaku) didn't gain even ¼ of that (fig 1). Showing that the debate is often shown through a white lens, possibly to relate to the higher economic, white consumer market.

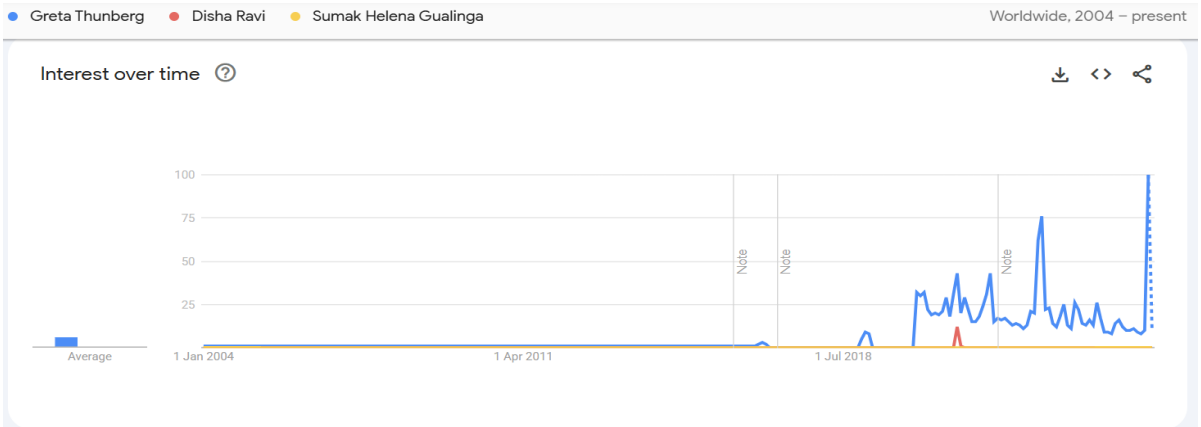

Fig. 1: a graph showing the percentage of searches of the three activists mentioned above, relative to the peak on the graph, which is Greta at 100. Source: Google Trends

When it comes to rhetoric and imagery surrounding climate change, we get two different sides. We have the ‘white saviour’ lens. Looking through this, we see policies that aim for pristine wilderness, a market led approach and technological based solutions. These all exclude people of colour from the solution. To create human-free wilderness, shoot to kill policies have been put in place to keep indigenous people out of land which was historically theirs (Tilley,2022). Market led solutions do not acknowledge that the market itself will benefit white people at the peril of the global south. Technological based solutions can exclude poorer countries in the south, who are most at risk.

The other lens is one of denial. It’s often used to trivialise the issue of climate change to protect the current order of free market capitalism (Mathers,2022). We’ve seen this in recent times, when America withdrew from Kyoto. They stated that, if large emitters from the south didn’t commit, their efforts would be futile. This viewpoint prioritises economic development over the future of our planet. While it is true that current big emitters from the south do need to act drastically, if large emitters from the north do nothing, then the priority is placed on the significantly poor south. They often do not have the means to make much of an impact. The north does.

Finally, unambitious climate goals will affect different societies differently. In the Paris agreement, the general target was set at 2c, with an ambitious target of 1.5c warming by the end of the century. It wasn’t the UK and America that would feel the effects of that 0.5c (Williams, 2022). Unambitious targets not only paint people of colour as disposable, but it also puts these societies at risk, while keeping societies in the north relatively safe.

Conclusion

Climate change is a natural process, and there are many causes. However, anthropogenic climate change has been intrinsically linked to the industrialisation of the North. Racial capitalism has left the global south in danger, while the north does very little to help. Those that have contributed most to climate change have gained enough economic capital to do something about it, while those who were exploited to get us to this point have barely enough to survive. Not only are the racial difference in the cause and effect, but also in discourse and solutions, with white voices often soaring high above their comrades of colour. Racism got us into this situation; racism will not get us out. Both the civil rights movement and the climate movement want the same thing - a better quality of life for our most marginalized groups (YCC TEAM, 2025). Climate change is inherently racist, and both issues need to be solved simultaneously if we want to survive through this.

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